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ABSTRACT

Writing samples of 97 students in remedial writing classes were analyzed to determine error patterns in writing mechanics and the predominance of specific errors. Students were grouped according to individual student profiles and error patterns which indicated additional similarities and differences among individuals. Analysis indicated that most students shared the error patterns of spelling and punctuation, although the patterns were crosscut by other categories. Significant findings were: (1) students with proportionally more errors in their compositions were those with more highly differentiated problems of error; (2) only four percent of the students showed very high error count in all areas of writing mechanics; (3) spelling was the most severe generalized problem of mechanics; and (4) students showed marked variation in their writing skills profiles. Individualized instruction would help the student overcome obvious difficulties and concentrate attention on clearly defined individual needs. (CWM)

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A RATIONALE FOR INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION IN REMEDIAL WRITING PROGRAMS

by

Clare M. Silva

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A RATIONALE FOR INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION IN REMEDIAL WRITING PROGRAMS

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The needs and concerns of all post-secondary writing students at least include the ability to write easily and competently within the mode of writing referred to as edited American English, or standard English. Beginning composition writers are expected to work toward the goal of expressing themselves clearly and coherently as students (in the writing of essay answers on examinations, as well as in the preparation of term papers and reports) and as future professionals (in the preparation of memorandums, reports, and correspondence). Students who are required to take remedial writing courses are found to be lacking in basic writing skills, i.e. sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, conventional performance with regard to grammmar, and choice of words or phrases for expression of thought in compliance with conventional word or idiom usage. These deficiencies are usually brought to light by low scores on a general test of verbal ability, such as the ACT or SAT verbal, and by the evaluation of a short composition written by the student.

There are several ways of taking care of students who need help in basic writing skills. Basically, however, the academic department responsible for a remedial program chooses either to continue with traditional classes of about 25 students per teacher that meet three to five times weekly, or to set up a laboratory environment wherein students work individually or in small groups with tutors. Sometimes combinations of lecture/discussion groups and laboratory sessions are used. The effectiveness of the traditional lecture-discussion approach in a remedial writing program versus the individualization of instruction in a laboratory or workshop approach to remedying writing deficiencies was looked at by Doris G. Sutton and Daniel S. Arnold. They found that "the highly

individualized instructional methodology employed in the Writing Laboratory had a significantly beneficial effect upon the future English grades of students."[1]

In non-individualized writing programs the degree to which writing deficiencies interact is apparently thought to be great, since remedial courses taught in the traditional classroom setting are designed to take the student at point zero and proceed from there to the level of proficiency which is expected in a first-year college program. However, my experience with remedial writing students has shown that the assumption that all of them have the same sets of problems--an assumption that would have to underlie the practice of throwing all these students together into a class that is expected to collectively repeat one more time the "educational experience" of learning what the ground rules for conventional composition are--is not a valid assumption. If the students are regularly producing writing samples in class, by the third week of a term it is fairly obvious that there are sets of students with special kinds of problems: a set with problems of sentence structure; a set with problems of word choice; a set with problems of interference from the language of casual conversation that affect spelling and word choice; and a set with problems of punctuation, to name a few.

Most students would probably belong to at least two of the above sets. By defining the individual students' needs and setting priorities for attending to them, a number of benefits result: (1) from the outset of his writing program the student is clearly aware of what he will need to do in order to achieve basic writing proficiency; (2) the student knows that his needs are real needs and consequently can be expected to more highly value both the effort required to meet the needs and the resulting accomplishment; (3) the student is put at ease by having a clearly delimited set of objectives to work towards--a limited goal; (4) the student is immediately helped to overcome his obvious difficulties and should find it easier to continue working to overcome other problems; and (5) the student's energies and attention are not wasted upon tasks which will not be of use to him.

In spite of the fact that the instructional methods employed in the traditional classroom focus upon an abstract student (the one who really isn't there), most educators would probably agree that students differ from each other in

many respects. Non-traditional teaching approaches are sometimes geared to the real live students, and some of these approaches involve individualized instruction. The individualization of learning may be present in the form of programmed materials (via texts or computer terminals) which allow the individual to proceed at his own pace through a predetermined selection of material, or in the form of tutorial classes wherein the student receives instruction on a one-to-one basis from a teacher who guides the student through instructional material, monitors his progress, and evaluates his performances. A considerable interest in individualized instruction is not unusual in writing programs. The Lunsford report noted that 29% of the 58 departments responding to her survey reported individualized programs, and 34% responded that their programs were partially individualized.[2]

The research reported on in this study has been carried out in an effort to provide a rational basis for implementing individualized instruction in remedial writing programs. I have analyzed and tabulated in considerable detail the placement test writings of 97 students who were placed in remedial writing classes at Columbus Technical Institute (a state-assisted two-year college in Columbus, Ohio) in the fall of 1976. After sorting out the findings of the analysis, I looked for individual student profiles, and grouped students by the patterns of error that they shared. Within these groups I found additional indications of similarities and differences among individuals.

This study is concerned with the mechanics of writing--it does not look directly at matters of unity, coherence, paragraphing, organization of material, or style. The subjective evaluations which are shown as peripheral data in the tabulations of error counts are the only reflection of writing skills other than mechanics. Furthermore, the analysis provided by the data looked at could in no way be the basis for establishing a complete course of instruction for any set of individuals. It would only indicate to the instructor what the students were willing or able to display of their writing ability at one point in time. Within a few weeks, if all went well, the students' error profiles would change: other errors would, and should, make their appearance as the students move towards writing proficiency in a learning environment in which they feel free to experiment with the forms

and structures that they had not wanted to show, or had not known how to use, in their first writing samples.

Bar graphs showing the distribution of the 97 students in categories of error counts are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Figure 1 shows the distribution of all 97 students in patterns of relative error counts, i.e. in categories of error where spelling, word choice, and punctuation are the determiners of classification. The error pattern shared by the most students is that of spelling and punctuation, i.e. relatively high error counts in these two areas, with relatively few errors in word choice. The patterns are crosscut by three other categories, corresponding to the students' words per error ratios. Group A is comprised of the top third of the 97 students; the range of words per error here is 14.2 through 33.9.[3] Group B is the medium group, with words per error ratios ranging from 9.3 through 14.1. The bottom third is Group C, with words per error ratios ranging from 3.1 through 9.2.

The other two large sets of students grouped by error patterns also are plagued by spelling difficulties--either predominantly spelling problems, or spelling problems in conjunction with problems of word choice.

The six bar graphs on the left side of the figure are those that show error counts with noticable differentiation among the three categories of error. The rightmost six bars represent error count categorizations with little or no differentiation among the three problem areas. The bar labeled Etc. consists of nine subjects who are probably the closest in representing the abstract set of students most traditional courses are directed to--a group of students whose problems are not clearly differentiated in terms of categories but whose error counts do not show a clear pattern of high, low, or medium scores across the board, either.

Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution of students in categories of absolute counts for few errors (Figure 2) and many errors (Figure 3). Few errors is here defined as one or two errors in spelling, one or two errors in word choice, and no error or only one in punctuation. Many errors means ten or more errors in spelling, eight or more in word choice, and five or more in punctuation. Although all 97 students are represented in Figure 1, not all of them appear in the absolute count representations, and there is some

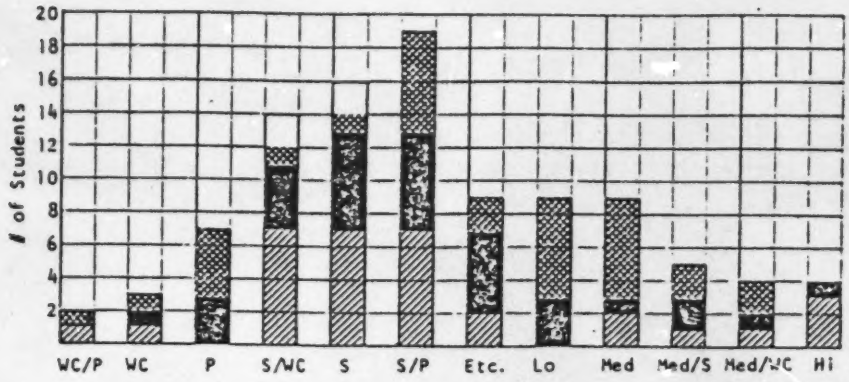

Figure 1. Relative Error Count Patterns

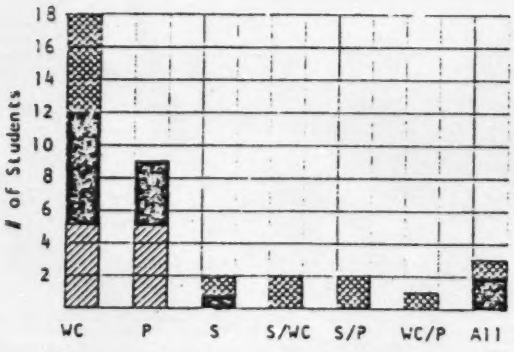

Figure 2. Absolute Counts--Few Errors

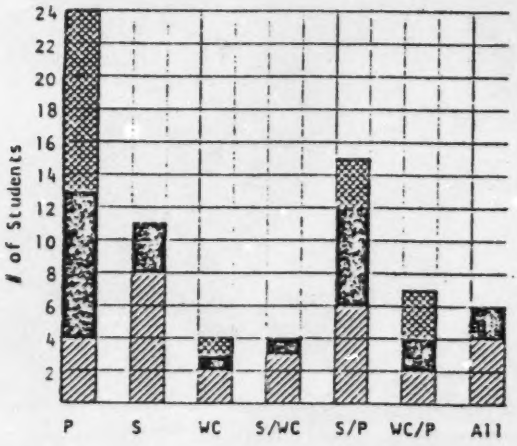

Figure 3. Absolute Counts--Many Errors

LEGEND for Figures 1, 2, and 3.

= Group A (high words per error ratio)
= Group B (medium words per error ratio)
= Group C (low words per error ratio)
WC = word choice
P = punctuation
S = spelling

Etc. = unclassified
Lo = low error scores in all areas
Med = medium error scores in all areas
Hi = high error scores in all areas
All = all three areas (WC, P, and S)
slash marks are used to show conjunction of two areas, e.g. S/WC = spelling and word choice errors

	Subj.	SE	W/err	Sp	WC	P	Length	Sm	Sh	Sp	Sf	WC	WO	F	CS	RO	IP	RS	X	SL
A.	86	++	23.2	7	3	10	464	0	1	5	1	2	1	2	0	0	8	9.7	0	14
	93	-+	20.5	13	3	7	471	3	0	6	4	3	0	1	0	0	6	---	1	20
	22	++	19.4	3	0	4	136	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	2	---	0	23
	48	++	19.2	4	0	6	192	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	10.7	1	27
	92	++	14.5	14	4	11	420	4	1	8	1	3	1	0	0	0	11	8.6	0	21
	87	++	14.5	10	6	10	378	2	2	4	2	5	1	3	0	0	7	13.6	0	18
B.	72	++	13.4	10	2	9	282	0	0	10	0	1	1	0	0	0	9	9.9	2	31
	36	--	13.3	6	1	5	160	3	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	5	10.3	0	23
	69	++	12.8	15	5	10	383	1	0	10	4	3	2	0	3	1	4	13.8	1	17
	17	-+	12.1	4	1	5	121	1	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	5	---	1	15
	95	++	10.8	9	1	5	162	0	2	7	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	6.9	0	16
C.	74	++	9.2	14	6	12	295	0	1	10	3	5	1	0	6	1	5	10.3	0	23
	62	--	9.0	13	1	12	233	0	1	11	1	1	0	2	0	0	10	7.8	1	14
	16	++	8.6	7	0	7	120	2	0	4	1	0	0	2	0	0	5	13.7	0	30
	77	++	7.8	18	7	14	306	4	2	12	0	7	0	0	1	2	11	10.2	0	16
	25	++	7.1	13	1	6	141	3	2	6	2	1	0	0	4	1	1	---	0	16
	8	--	6.5	8	1	5	91	4	0	3	1	1	0	3	0	0	2	7.1	0	13
	26	++	3.1	26	5	15	142	8	0	16	2	5	0	3	1	2	9	9.1	0	16

Figure 4. Relatively high error count on spelling and punctuation.

LEGEND

A=high W/err group
B=medium W/err group
C=low W/err group
Subj.=subject
SE=subjective evaluations
W/err=words per error

Sp=spelling
WC=word choice
P=punctuation
Sm=morpheme confusion
Sh=homonym confusion
Sp=spelling
Sf=compound word problem

WC=word choice
WO=word omission
F=sentence fragment
CS=comma splice
RO=run-on sentence
IP=internal punctuation
RS=reading test score
X=X-rated syntax
SL=sentence length

overlap between the students represented in Figures 2 and 3. It is, for example, possible to have few errors in word choice, but many in spelling and/or punctuation.

Figure 4 is a table of the error count scores of the students that comprise the category of relatively high error counts in spelling and punctuation--those represented by the bar labeled Sp/P in Figure 1. The breakdown of spelling and punctuation counts into subcategories (as shown to the right of the table) shows the different kinds of problems students have within these two basic categories. Spelling is broken down into categories of spelling problems having to do with confusion regarding morphology--sometimes matters of omission or wrong choice of inflectional and derivational suffixes or prefixes (e.g. use to for used to, and inpersonal for impersonal), confusion regarding homonymous forms (e.g. writing their for there, and vice versa), "ordinary" spelling problems (where the writer doesn't know about i before e except after c, for example), and confusion regarding the compounding of word forms (e.g. alot for a lot). Punctuation is subcategorized in terms of three classes of sentence-external punctuation problems that result in sentence fragments, comma splices, or run-on sentences, plus a general class of sentence-internal punctuation problems, usually matters of faulty comma placement or comma omission.

In the A group of Figure 4 we can notice first of all that two of the students are very low in terms of productivity. Subjects numbers 22 and 48 produced writing samples considerably shorter than their groupmates. They also had fewer errors. With regard to spelling, two students had no problems with morpheme confusion, another two had no problems with homonymous forms, and one had no problems with word compounding. Only one member of the set produced comma splices, and two of the students in the set had punctuation problems only in the sentence-internal area.

In the B group two members of the set have no problems with morpheme structures or connections, only one shows a problem with homonymous forms, and one has no problem with ordinary spelling. We find three students who have only sentence-internal punctuation problems, only two have problems of sentence fragmentation, only two show comma splices, and only one shows a run-on sentence.

The production levels of this group are quite a bit lower than those of Group A.

Group C has two students with no morphological problems, three others with no difficulties with homonymous forms, and one with no problems of compounding. Three of these students have no difficulties with sentence fragmentation, and another three show no comma splices or run-on sentences. Notice, too, that there is relatively little X-rated syntax in this group--only one student exhibits it. (X-rated syntax is a problem of syntax that cannot be resolved by simply changing or adding a word or symbol.) Group B showed more of this kind of problem than either Group A or C.

Basically, the significant findings that the analysis brought to light which are illustrated in Figures 1 through 4 are the following:

1. The students in the sample who have proportionally more errors in their written compositions are those who, in general, have more highly differentiated problems of error, i.e. tend to show more error in one or two of the three basic categories of writing mechanics. Witness the predominance of Group C subjects in the differentiated sets in Figure 1.
2. Only 4% of the students in the sample show very high error count in all the areas of writing mechanics.
3. The most severe generalized problem of mechanics for the students in this sample is that of spelling. Only two students showed relatively few problems in spelling but high error counts in the areas of word choice and punctuation.
4. Even though a considerable number of error patterns are noted, and in spite of the fact that these groups are crosscut by categories of words per error categorizations, the students within the 32 groups showed marked variation in their writing skills profiles. Features which serve to further differentiate the students are error counts in the second-level subsets of the three basic categories.

The only single generalization possible regarding the writing of the students in this sample is that all of it shows problems with basic writing

skills. The problems are not the same from one student to another except in very broad terms, i.e., all of the students show problems of spelling, word choice, and/or punctuation. The problem of productivity is closely related to the problems of writing mechanics, insofar as the more productive writers generally have proportionately fewer problems than the less productive ones. There are further problems of style (voice, or sense of audience) and organizational ability that also differentiate writers, although they are not touched upon here.

The evidence is that there are more differences than similarities among remedial writing students' profiles of writing disability even at the level of fairly gross analysis. At this level--wherein writing mechanics are considered in terms of spelling, word choice, and punctuation--there are differences among the subjects in kind and degree of dominant error(s). At a finer level of analysis, whereby problems of writing mechanics are broken down into rather general sub-categories, the variety and degree of error differences increase considerably. Further sub-categorization would be possible (witness the nature of the problems of ordinary spelling, for example, or the kinds of sentence fragmentation that are possible), but it is not necessary to carry the analysis to this length to establish that remedial writing students show greater differences than similarities with regard to the problems they have in writing.

The findings of this study support the assumptions underlying an instructional approach which perceives and works with individual differences in basic writing programs. Recognition of the great range of differentiation among individuals makes it obvious that it is a waste of time and endeavor for all remedial writing students to "study" the same material. Apart from the fact that different people learn at a different pace or in a different manner, students in remedial writing programs do not need to learn the same things. Although they are in a remedial program because they are not on a par with students who are considered to be ready for traditional post-secondary composition classes, these students with problems are all at different points on a broad-based continuum representing skill in writing--all below the point where post-secondary composition classes traditionally begin, but each one at his or her particular stage of development in the acquisition of basic writing skills.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Remedial English: A Descriptive and Evaluative Report," (typewritten) Dept. of English, The Ohio State University, 1976, p. 96.

2. "The Effects of Two Methods of Compensatory Freshman English," Research in the Teaching of English 9 (1974), p. 248.

3. Mina Shaughnessy notes that five or six errors per 300 words is the maximum number of common errors that "an average academic reader is likely to tolerate." (Errors and Expectations, Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 122. In terms of words per error this would amount to 50 or 60 words for each error of writing mechanics.

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